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SUBJECT: CHALDEAN: IRAQI CHRISTIANS TARGETED AFTER POPE'S REMARKS

REF: A) VATICAN 000206, ET AL. B) VATICAN 000181

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter G. Martin, POL ECON Chief, AMEMB VATICAN,
STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (S) Summary: Monsignor Philip Najim, Representative of the Chaldean Catholic Church to the Holy See, and the Chaldean Patriarch's First Counselor, Bishop Ibrahim Ibrahim of Detroit, Michigan told Poloff in a recent meeting that Christians faced increasing violence in Iraq. They said the papal remarks in Regensburg (ref A) had provided already-hostile elements within Iraq the excuse to target Christians in an effort to further their own agendas. The circumstances surrounding the recent kidnapping, interrogation and release of a Chaldean priest may indicate that former regime elements are using the pope's remarks to isolate and drive-out the Christian community in Iraq. Although the Holy See itself is less sure that recent problems for Christians were caused by the pope's remarks, the pope himself is very concerned about the Chaldean Church in Iraq and made an early October statement in apparent response to the kidnappers' demand for a papal apology. End Summary.

Iraqi Christians Targeted After Pope Delivers Regensburg Remarks

12. (C) Najim said the security environment for Iraqi Christians had changed dramatically after the adverse publicity the Pope's Regensburg comments received in Iraq. In contrast to his August 2006 comments (ref B) indicating Christians were not targeted based on their religious affiliation (Comment: Najim and other Chaldean interlocutors have expressed varying views on this issue over the last few years), Najim now indicates that Christians and church institutions face daily attacks and threats specifically because of their religion and association with the pope and his comments.

13. (C) According to Najim, Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel Delly met recently with Iraqi government officials including Prime Minister Maliki and President Talabani seeking their assistance in support of the Iraqi Christian community. Najim also indicated that Delly continues to seek support and cooperation with the Muslim Community and had met recently with the Grand Ayatollah Sistani and Ulema Council Leader Harith al-Dhari.

Kidnappers: "We Have a Message for the Pope"

14. (S) Najim briefed on the September 2006 abduction and

release of Iraqi Chaldean Priest Father Saleem Yaldo, the personal secretary to the Chaldean Patriarch and the head of a Baghdad Parish. Najim said Yaldo's kidnappers, who he believes are associated with the former regime, wanted to obtain information on the exact nature of the Chaldean Church in Iraq and released Yaldo for the specific purpose of carrying a threat to the Pope. According to Najim, the kidnappers' motivation was to make the United States appear weak and to demonstrate that the former regime still holds power within Iraq.

15. (S) Najim said the kidnappers made four specific demands of Yaldo: 1) inform the pope that Christians are not welcome in Iraq as a result of his Regensburg comments and that the pope must apologize for his comments; 2) sever all contact and cooperation between the Chaldean Church and the Government of Iraq; 3) sever all contact and cooperation between the Chaldean Church and the United States; and finally 4) all Christians must immediately leave the Baghdad neighborhoods of Karada, Dora, Kadhimya, and Al-Jadida (New Baghdad) or face death. (Note: Patriarch Delly was in Rome at the time of our meeting but demurred on a formal meeting with us due to the sensitivities involved with Yaldo's kidnapping and associated threats.)

16. (S) Najim claimed that the interrogation techniques used by the kidnappers were eerily similar to the techniques used by the former regime's intelligence service. Yaldo was interrogated by a three-person team headed by exceptionally intelligent and well-dressed heavy-set man in his early fifties with grey hair and beard. According to Najim (and as later related to us by Yaldo), the interrogations, which lasted approximately three hours and were tape-recorded, were conducted by the team's leader. The second team member stood behind Yaldo with a pistol to his head and the third member of the team stood behind the interrogator observing Yaldo. Any time the third member thought he detected a lie or inconsistency in Yaldo's response, he would signal the member standing behind Yaldo to hit Yaldo with the pistol's butt. It was clear, Najim stated, that the interrogators were double-checking Yaldo's answers after each of the interrogation sessions with outside parties

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and then used the information gleaned at the following session to threaten Yaldo and to extract additional information. Najim also mentioned the Kidnappers told Yaldo "it is good you are not Shiite." Yaldo showed us the marks he still bore on his arms as a result of being bound with telephone cords during his ordeal.

Pope Makes Declaration in Support of Iraqi Christians

17. (C) After receiving a detailed brief from Patriarch Delly regarding the Yaldo kidnapping and the kidnappers' demands, Pope Benedict XVI spoke out on October 1, 2006 in support of the Iraqi Christian community and expressed his desire for the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Iraq. The pope indicated that Patriarch Delly had spoken to him of the violence faced by the Christian community in Iraq "where Christians and Muslims have lived together for fourteen centuries as children of the same land." (Comment: The pope likely did not make his comments solely to address the kidnappers' demands - he has often spoken out on peace and violence in Iraq - but the timing of his remarks was more than a coincidence.)

"I am Already Dead": The Rape/Suicide of a Christian Girl

18. (C) Najim provided an example of the recent escalation of violence directed toward Christians, telling of the recent kidnapping, rape and suicide of a young Christian girl. According to Najim, a young Christian girl was kidnapped recently in Baghdad and held for ransom. When her kidnappers told her to call her family to tell them she was alive, she told her family not to pay the ransom because "I am already dead" and

then disconnected the call. She apparently had been raped repeatedly by her captors as a "whore of the pope" and later, because of her shame, committed suicide by taking an overdose of medicine.

Comment: Sobering Encounters

19. (C) Najim's concern for the Chaldean community - and for all Christians in Iraq - has been a constant refrain in the many conversations we have had with him. This conversation was markedly different in its tone, as both Najim and Ibrahim expressed little hope that the situation for Christians in Iraq would improve. Though we did not meet formally with Patriarch Delly, we did see him by chance at the Vatican. He gave Poloff an emotional embrace, and struggled to maintain his composure as he spoke of his community's current struggles. Officials in the Vatican's MFA were not ready to admit that the pope's Regensburg remarks had worsened the fortunes of Christians in Iraq, but they told us that Delly had provided the most sobering accounts of the plight of Iraqi Christians that they had ever heard - and had gained the pope's full attention (septel). Our Chaldean interlocutors told us that the papal remarks had provided already-hostile elements within Iraq the excuse to target Christians in an effort to bolster their standing within the insurgency. Najim and Ibrahim told us that what remains of the Christian community is staying away from the Church - and many may join their co-religionists in fleeing the country.
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